

Will the Real Disciples Please Stand Up

Mark 8:34-38

Introduction

Wilmer McLean was a retired grocer who lived in Virginia. When the rumblings of the Civil War were beginning to be heard, he, disliking battle so much, decided to move. He moved just outside the backyard of Washington and, if you can believe it, when the battle began, the first battle took place on his new farm. A cannonball came down the chimney of his home, his barn was destroyed, and he, in anger, moved to south Virginia. As the war progressed and finally ended, as Grant chased Lee's starving men, there was one final battle at Appomattox, where Wilmer had just purchased his new farm. They fought on his land and, to add injury to insult, Grant received the surrender of Lee in the parlor of Wilmer McLean's home.

When the war was over, people wanted mementos of that special day. So, they took pictures off the walls and pieces of furniture from the room. By the end of that day, Wilmer was standing in an almost empty living room with only a small couch left. History records that Wilmer McLean was a man who hated war, yet war began in his front yard and ended in his parlor.

Being an American citizen, at times, means that we will be involved in battle. Even in our generation, perhaps, we will see battle once again.

However, being a disciple of Jesus Christ, inevitably means doing battle. Whether it is against our sinful nature, the forces of Satan, or the value system of this world, we *will* do battle. We cannot run from it. Yet, I fear, while many claim to be disciples, in the thick of the battle, their rifles are silent. You never see them advance; you never hear them say, "Charge!"

Jesus Christ was facing a problem that we find detailed in our study today. He has a multitude of people following Him; a multitude of people who are saying, "Yes, I am following Christ. Yes, I am a disciple." Jesus Christ turns to them and, in very clear statements, details the marks of genuine discipleship. He says, in effect, "If you are a disciple of Mine, there are several things that will be evidenced in your life."

We find the piercing gaze of Christ in Mark, chapter 8.

A Genuine Disciple Will Become Like Christ

Look at Mark 8:34.

And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me."

The first mark of a genuine disciple is that he will become like Christ.

Things a genuine disciple of Christ will deny

In becoming like Christ, a genuine disciple will deny three things.

1. First, this individual will deny self-interest.

Notice that Mark 8:34 says,

... If anyone wishes to come after Me [to be a genuine disciple], he must deny himself, . .

This could literally be translated, “. . . he must say, ‘No,’ to himself”. A genuine disciple must deny self-interest.

You may remember, on one occasion, those who would be His disciples came to Him, yet found excuses (Luke 14). One individual had just purchased land; another individual had just bought a team of oxen; a third individual had just married a wife. Their self-interests came before genuinely following Jesus Christ.

Jesus says, “If you will really be My disciple, you will learn to say, ‘No,’ to your own self-interests.”

2. Secondly, a genuine disciple will deny safety and security.

Look again at Mark 8:34. Jesus says,

. . . If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross . . .

This was a vivid picture to all who were following Christ. A few years before Jesus began His ministry, a man, by the name of Judas, gathered a large band of Jews who sought to overthrow Rome by force. They lost. The soldiers lined the streets of Galilee with the crosses bearing the bodies of these insurrectionists, with Judas himself, being the leader. So this is the picture when Jesus says, “If you wish to follow Me, take up your cross.”

One problem, ladies and gentlemen, is that we have turned the Bible into an American book. We say, “Jesus is referring, in this passage, to a bad back; to arthritis; to a grumpy employer; to a mate who is unforgiving; to a rebellious child . . .”.

That is not what Jesus is referring to in this verse. He is referring to a literal cross. He is saying, “If you will follow Me, you must deny security and safety. You may, in fact, end up on a cross.”

Jesus was not talking about a devotional cross.

John Wesley records that one day he was visiting a very wealthy man. They were sitting in the man’s parlor and he ordered a slave to come and throw coals on the fire. The slave came in and threw coals rather sloppily on the fire and a puff of smoke filled the parlor. The rich man said, “Oh, Mr. Wesley, the crosses I must bear.”

This is not what Jesus was talking about.

He was not talking about a mystical cross.

We read this verse and think about calvary. The disciples did not know anything about calvary yet.

They did not know that Jesus Christ would be nailed to a cross; they were not aware of that yet.

So the cross that Jesus was talking about was not mystical and it was not devotional; it was literal. Jesus Christ says, “If you will be My disciple, you must be willing to follow Me, even to the death.”

Let me read what happened, as history records, to the apostles:

- Matthew suffered martyrdom by being slain with a sword in Ethiopia.
- Mark died in Alexandria, after having been cruelly dragged through the streets of that city.
- Luke was hanged upon an olive tree in Greece.
- John was put in a pot of boiling oil and was later, branded to death at Patmos.
- Peter was crucified and, in fact, his wife was crucified first. When it was Peter’s turn, he asked that he be crucified upside-down, as he was unwilling to die like Christ.
- James was thrown from the pinnacle of the temple and then, beaten to death with a club.
- Bartholomew was skinned alive.
- Andrew was bound to a cross from which he preached until he died.
- Thomas was run through with a spear.
- Jude was shot to death with arrows.
- Matthias was stoned and then, beheaded.
- Barnabas was stoned to death.
- Paul, after various tortures and persecutions, was beheaded at Rome by the emperor Nero.

Ladies and gentlemen, these men knew what Jesus meant when He said, “If you will follow Me, you must follow Me to the death.”

They were willing to say, “Yes,” but they would slide. However, they would then, once again, follow Him and, in fact, die.

You and I have the problem of living in such comfort that we cannot understand this passage. However, a Christian who has just been exiled to Siberia can well understand it. The little boy in India, who named Christ and had his fingers cut off can understand it.

There may come a time, my friends, when we will understand. It may be that in our lifetime, we will have to declare that we are willing to follow Christ.

The point that Jesus is making is that if you are a genuine disciple, you will deny self-interest and you will deny security and safety and you will be abandoned to a cause. Jesus is not interested in introducing comfort to you. He is interested in introducing to you a cause – a passionate cause. Those who are willing to take it up are, in fact, genuine disciples.

3. Thirdly, a genuine disciple will deny self-management.

Look at the last part of Mark 8:34.

. . . If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me.

Notice that Jesus says of a genuine disciple, “he will also follow Me.” If you are following Christ, then obviously, He is in front; He is calling the shots; He is managing; He has the reigns.

My family has just started watching a series of shows on Cablevision about Psalm 23. The more I study that Psalm, the more it becomes obvious that all of that Psalm is conditioned by our ability to say, “The Lord is *my* shepherd.” If we cannot say, “He is the shepherd; He is leading; He is out front; He is calling the shots,” then, ladies and gentlemen, He is not our shepherd – and we may not be His disciples.

Let me give two notes on this point.

- First, Jesus never sugar-coated the call to discipleship. In fact, He often emphasized the negative.

You never find Jesus bribing men with offers of easy living. You never find Him offering increased salaries, improved health, better surroundings, or that everyone will get along.

What Jesus promised was something like Winston Churchill who, when he took over the Prime Ministry of England, offered men blood, toil, tears, and sweat.

A famous Italian general appealed for recruits in these terms, “I offer neither pay nor provision. I offer hunger, thirst, forced marches, battles, and death. Let him who loves his country in his heart, and not with his lips only, follow me.”

Those are the terms of Jesus Christ, as well. Are you a genuine disciple, willing to follow Him – even under those terms?

- Secondly, Jesus never expected disciples to do what He never did.

I like this. He never suggested to His disciples, “Hey, see the crosses over there? You bear them and I’ll stand over here and watch; I’ll cheer you on.”

He is not an armchair general up in heaven somewhere, using us like some kind of expendable pawn.

I play chess in a very fascinating way. I do not know if you ever play chess, but I give the pawns away just to advance another piece one step. Pawns are expendable to me. I usually lose the game.

Jesus Christ does not treat His disciples like little pawns. He does not say, “I could do without you.” He is very concerned about every detail.

Jesus Christ denied self-interest. He denied security and safety. He denied self-management. He did everything that He asks you and me to do, as His disciples.

A Genuine Disciple Will Be Treated Like Christ

The second thing that I think we will find from the text that marks a genuine disciple is that they not only become like Christ in denying things, but they will also be treated like Christ.

Look at Mark 8:35.

For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it.

A genuine disciple, ladies and gentlemen, will identify with the character of Christ – he will become like Him. He will also identify with the rejection of Christ – he will be treated like Him. Just as Jesus Christ was accepted and rejected by those who heard the message, so should you and I expect the same response.

One of the most shattering things to a new believer, as he begins living for Jesus Christ, is that people are not interested in what has just revolutionized his life. He comes to the job the next Monday morning all “hyped up,” saying, “Man, you won’t believe what happened to me!”

People look at him like he is from another planet. He ceases to get the invitations from friends. He may be overlooked for a promotion because he is now considered a fanatic.

Ladies and gentlemen, people are not going to line up at your front door with decision cards already filled out. They are not going to say, "Oh, just by looking at your life, I've wanted Jesus Christ."

Now that may happen on occasion, but they are not lined up.

You need to realize that you will experience rejection.

Jesus says in this verse,

... whoever wishes to save his life will lose it ...

He is still referring, ladies and gentlemen, to death. Jesus is saying that if you come to a point at which your choice is either the cross or life, then you either reject Jesus Christ or you die. If that point in time comes in your life, as it would these disciples', and you say, "I will live, rather than die," then that evidences that you are, in fact, not a genuine disciple. That is very hard, but it is true.

Turn to Luke, chapter 12. Luke expands this point. Look at Luke 12:4-7.

I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do.

But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!

Are not five sparrows sold for two cents? Yet not one of them is forgotten before God.

Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows.

Now, let me stop at this point and give to you something that Jesus Christ gave to His disciples. He has said, in effect:

- If you will be a genuine disciple, you will become like Me.
- If you will be a genuine disciple, you will be treated like Me.

This causes, in our hearts, the potential of fear. We think, "Wait a second! I can't handle rejection. I don't like the scoffing. I'm embarrassed with the mocking. I'm afraid of people and their responses."

Reasons a genuine disciple should not fear

Jesus Christ gives three reasons in this text, as to why we should not fear.

1. The first reason Jesus gives that we should not fear is that we have His promise.

Turn back to Matthew, chapter 10, and let us look at the amplified account. Jesus is saying, "Don't be afraid." This gospel account gives us the full story.

We will begin with Matthew 10:25. Jesus is saying that when we are His disciples and become like Him, we will be treated like Him.

It is enough for the disciple that he become like his teacher, and the slave like his master. If they have called the head of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign the members of his household!

Do you know what He is saying in this verse? He is saying, "When I walked through this earth, I performed tremendous miracles. I did many wonders and signs, and they called Me, 'Satan.' Now, if they call Me 'Satan' and I am the Christ and do all of these things, how much more should you expect that they call you 'Satan'? How much more should you expect their reproof and their rejection?"

Let us continue to Matthew 10:26. This is Jesus' promise.

Therefore do not fear them, for there is nothing concealed that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known.

Whatever rejection or reproof or mocking or whatever we might experience, one of the wonderful things about living for Jesus Christ is knowing that there is the promise of vindication. One day, ladies and gentlemen, the Hudson Taylors, the C. T. Studs, the George Muellers, the William Booths, and insert your name as well, will be vindicated. One day, God will right all of the wrongs and justice will be wrought.

We have His promise! So, if they slay you; if they reject you; if they reprove you, look toward heaven because then comes the vindication.

2. The second reason Jesus gives that we, as genuine disciples, should not fear is because we have His power.

Look at Matthew 10:28.

Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

Again, my friends, it is hard for us to climb into the skin of this gospel writer because there are no lions in our town. There are no burning stakes on the corners of our streets. It is very hard for us to understand what he is saying. However, I think we can apply this in the sense that we should fear the God who has the power to send an individual to hell forever, rather than fearing someone who can only hurt the body in a temporary way.

We have Jesus' promise. We have Jesus' power.

3. The third reason Jesus gives that we should not fear is that we have His provision.

Look at Matthew 10:29-31.

Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So do not fear; you are more valuable than many sparrows.

I would imagine that in the throws of persecution, Jesus' disciples felt, "I'm not worth anything. God must have forgotten me. I am of no value."

Have you ever felt this way? Have you ever felt that you are insignificant in this great cause of Christ?

My friend, the sparrow was the cheapest animal that could be purchased for sacrificing. It was the most insignificant of all of the animals. Jesus chose that one and said, "Look, at the sparrow. Not one of them dies that I haven't taken note. I haven't missed one. You can buy about five of them for a penny. Aren't you worth more than a little sparrow?"

Jesus uses another animal, as well. He talks about the ravens in Luke 12:24.

Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; they have no storeroom nor barn, and yet God feeds them; how much more valuable you are than the birds!

Jesus says, in this verse, that the ravens are also taken note of by God.

It is interesting that the raven was a bird that was considered ceremonially unclean. So, the application is again, "You will be a religious or ceremonially unclean outcast. You will be considered dirt; scum; a Gentile. Yet, you are so significant to God that even though you are an unclean thing; even though you may be considered insignificant, in My kingdom, you gain significance."

My friend, you gained value when you entered the family of God. You are worth more by being part of that family than you would ever be worth in this world's estimation in choosing to follow Him.

Two piercing questions

Now, turn back to Mark. Jesus asks two piercing questions as He tries to pull the mask off those who are masquerading as true disciples.

1. The first question Jesus asks is, "What is your primary pursuit in life?"

Look at Mark 8:36.

For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?

What is your primary pursuit in life? Is it riches? Is it wealth?

There is not a wealthy man who would not give it all away for one more breath of air. It seems that we are confronted with death. In fact, in the last few weeks, my family has seen people go on to be with the Lord. I recently came back from my wife's parent's home. I spent a lot of time in the room with my father-in-law, who is in heaven now, and I watched him die. In those last moments, when none of the rest of the family were there and I was there alone, it was very difficult to see him ask for water. Although he could not talk, he looked at me with pleading eyes, and I said, "I love you, Pop."

He looked back and whispered, "I love you."

Even though he was bound for heaven, and is there now, there is no doubt in my mind that he would have given away all that he had to get out of that bed and go home.

My friend, we need to take stock of our lives from that kind of deathbed setting. Put yourself there. What is really of worth? What is really of value? Is it the kind of car that you drive? Is it the kind of house that you own? Is it the kind of promotion that you receive? Is it the kind of clothing that you wear? It is all insignificant when you are in intensive care in a hospital gown.

Jesus says, in this verse, the very same thing,

For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and [lose] his soul?

How tragic.

2. The second question Jesus asks is another penetrating question that we could rephrase,

“What is your price tag?” or “What is your character really worth?”

Look at Mark 8:37.

For what will a man give in exchange for his soul?

Jesus is asking, “What’s your character really worth?”

So, if you “fudge” on an income tax return and get a hundred more dollars back, are you saying that your character is only worth a hundred dollars? If the store clerk gives you back fifty cents too much change at the grocery store, and you say, “Oh, who cares?” – is your character only worth fifty cents?

What is the price tag on your soul? What would Satan have to give you to get you to turn from following Christ to following him? What are you selling out to today?

A Genuine Disciple Will Be Rewarded With Christ

The final characteristic of a genuine disciple is that he will not only become like Christ; he will not only be treated like Christ, but one day, he will be rewarded with Christ.

Look at Mark 8:38.

For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.

Turn again to Luke, chapter 12. Let us look at Luke 12:8, which is the positive reward.

And I say to you, everyone who confesses Me before men, the Son of Man will confess him also before the angels of God;

The word “confess” means, “to declare, to affirm, to agree, to openly, publicly state, ‘He is my Christ.’”

Ladies and gentlemen, there is a public declaration of discipleship. There is a time in your life and in my life that if I am genuinely a disciple of Jesus Christ, I will verbalize it; I will publicly state it.

Jesus will say, “That one over there – that one belongs to Me. Angels, I want you to take note – he’s a disciple of Mine.”

Can you imagine?!

Now, look at Luke 12:9.

but he who denies Me before men will be denied before the angels of God.

Secret Christianity denies the very intention of discipleship. Jesus intended for you to verbalize it. If you fail to verbalize it; if you shrink back; if you are ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ, as difficult as it is to imagine, Jesus Christ will deny you.

Turn to Revelation, chapter 3. Let us look at what the disciples in Philadelphia were promised by way of reward.

First, look at their opportunity, in Revelation 3:8.

I know your deeds. Behold, I have put before you an open door which no one can shut, because you have a little power, and have kept My word, and have not denied My name.

Underline the words “open door”. This is the same thing that Jesus has given to us – an opportunity. He tells the Philippians that no one can shut that door. Why? Because they had a little power. I love that. They did not have a lot of power; they were not very dynamic, but they had a little power. Note the Philippians had kept His word and had not denied His name. Jesus was honoring that.

Notice the reward, in Revelation 12:12.

He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of My God, . . .

This sounds strange. Jesus is going to turn us into stone pillars. Wow, what a fantastic reward!

No. Jesus is referring back into the history of Philadelphia.

Philadelphia was known as the “little Athens”. There were hundreds of temples for the worship of Dionysus, the goddess of the grape, because they grew grapes in Philadelphia. They had a practice that whoever would serve the city well; whoever was a faithful citizen; whoever honored the name of Philadelphia; whoever lived in an exemplified manner; whoever propagated the development of Philadelphia, would one day, when he died, have a pillar bearing his name, erected in one of these temples in his honor. It was like being awarded an entrance into the Hall of Fame. It was a tremendous honor.

So, Jesus is saying, “If you will keep My name, I will one day honor you.”

Notice the next phrase in Revelation 3:12,

. . . and he will not go out from it anymore . .

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This again, is a reference to the historical setting of Philadelphia. Philadelphia was located at the base of a volcano. It was basically this volcano that had fertilized the ground and caused the grapes to grow so lusciously. Occasionally, however, that volcano would begin to rumble and the people would not know whether it was going to erupt or not. So, they would flee from the city until it was over and then, they would return. They lived in constant fear.

Jesus Christ is saying, "I will make you a pillar in the temple of My God and you will not go out from it anymore."

In other words, there was no need to fear anymore; no need to leave – you are home; you are safe. What a promise that is to those who will be disciples.

Application

By way of application, let me give two thoughts.

1. First, discipleship demands reshaping. Are you available?
2. Secondly, discipleship involves rejection. Are you willing?

In the mid-1800's, Henri Dunant was a wealthy, thirty-year-old Swiss banker. He went to France to meet with Napoleon about a business venture that he knew would make them very rich. When he arrived in France, he was told that the general had already taken off for war, which was being fought nearby. So Dunant, being the aggressive entrepreneur that he was, got on his horse and took off for the battlefield, hoping to catch Napoleon before the battle began. When he arrived at the top of the hill overlooking the

field where they were fighting, he noticed that he was already too late. He saw the calvary groups charge and collide; he saw the carnage; he heard the screams. He was so affected that he never went back to Switzerland. He stayed in that town for three weeks helping those who had been injured and helping to bury the dead.

Henri Dunant was a man who had now found another passion. He spent his entire fortune and his entire life founding an organization to help those in need. Finally, in 1901, he was exonerated – he was given the first Nobel peace prize, with a handsome sum of money attached to it. He gave it all away to the cause that he had founded – the Red Cross. He was penniless and lived his final days in the poor house. Yet, he was a disciple of the cause that consumed him.

Ladies and gentlemen, Jesus Christ offers to you and to me a crusade; a purpose; a reason for living. It is something beyond ourselves; something far greater than our puny little lives could ever imagine – the cause of Jesus Christ. It is advancing His kingdom; it is sharing the news that He is alive.

This is a very difficult passage to exegete and even more difficult to digest because, my friends, Jesus Christ is making an implication. If you are not becoming like Christ, if you are not being treated like Christ, if you are not experiencing the same rewards as Christ, then, you are not a disciple, you are not saved, you do not belong to Jesus Christ.

It is time to take stock. Are we a real, genuine disciple of Christ? Let us sum it up in one sentence – if you are unwilling to bear the cross, you will never wear the crown.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/28/1988 by Stephen Davey.

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